

RESEARCH PAPER

John Philip Torp

United States Army Chaplain Center and School
Fort Wadsworth, New York
1975

CHRISTIANITY AND DELINQUENT ADOLESCENTS

RESEARCH PAPER

Submitted in fulfillment of the writing requirements for
the Chaplain Advanced Course
in the United States Army Chaplain Center and School

by
John Philip Torp
Staten Island, New York

Fort Wadsworth, New York
1975

Christianity and Delinquent Adolescents

A common misconception about delinquent adolescents is that they do not go to church. This is not true. Of the sample studied, approximately forty per cent were church members. The majority of the rest were church attenders although they were non-members.

J. Edgar Hoover said, "In practically all homes where juvenile delinquency is bred there is an absence of adequate religious training for children. . . Most of them have never been inside a church."¹ The emphasis here is upon adequate.

Another authority, William Kvaraceus, states that of the more than seven hundred delinquent adolescents brought to the Children's Bureau of Passaic, New Jersey, while he was its Director, fifty-four per cent of them attended church regularly, and twenty-five per cent seldom or never. He further found that there was no significant difference between the percentages of church membership among delinquent children and the entire population of New Jersey.²

The findings of Kvaraceus are confirmed in this study. The percentage of delinquent adolescents of any given denomination or religious group at Kentucky Village is practically identical with the percentage of people in Kentucky belonging to that denomination or

¹ J. Edgar Hoover, "The Youth Problem Today", Chicago Schools Journal, XXX (1948) 34.

² William Kvaraceus, "Delinquent Behavior and Church Attendance", Sociology and Social Research, XXVIII (1944) 285.

religious group. There is but one major exception to the last statement, and that is in regard to the Jews. In the entire history of Kentucky Village there have been but two known Jews, and one of these professed to be a Baptist.

Two main reasons are offered as being responsible for this fact. One is that there are exceptionally strong family ties in the Jewish faith. Religion is an integral part of the family life. The second is that the emphasis of the hope of salvation in Judaism is on the social group as opposed to the Christian emphasis on the individual.

The facts are, however, that church membership or church attendance are not guarantees that a child will not become delinquent. Conversely, the fact that a child is delinquent is no indication that he has not been a church member or attender. Delinquent children are in church, and yet they are still delinquent. Why? The thesis upon which this paper is based is a quest for an answer to that question. This will be done by covering several specific areas of concern. The concepts of deity, prayer, heaven and hell, and the Bible which these delinquent adolescents have will be examined. What these concepts mean to the young persons will be explored. Finally, it will be indicated what all this means to the pastor working with adolescents, what his responsibilities are, and what he can do about it.

The Concept of Deity

Many delinquent adolescents profess to have no belief in any god, and specifically no belief in the Christian God.

When the adolescent says, "I do not believe in God", he may

be meaning one of two things. First, he may mean exactly what he said, i.e., that he does not think there is a god. He feels there is no truth in the idea of a deity and finds it impossible to accept such an incredulous concept. Or, second, he may mean that though he is receptive to the idea of a deity, he has not entrusted, or is not willing to entrust, his life to this deity. Simply stated he may believe there is a god, but he has no faith in him.

The question that arises is, Why has this person not put his faith in God? Why has he not surrendered or committed his life to God, especially since basically he believes that there is a god? The reasons are numerous and complex, and will be varied with each person. However, there is one general principle of which we can be reasonably certain, i.e., he is afraid. In large measure his attitudes about God are the result of his experiences with authority figures in his own life. If he loves God it is chiefly due to the fact that he has loved the authority figures in his past. Conversely, if he fears God it is chiefly due to the fact that he has feared the authority figures in his past.

This fear may take many forms and degrees of intensity. He may fear punishment. He may fear rejection. He may fear untrustworthiness. He may fear weakness and failing. Whatever the specific fear or fears, he has professed disbelief because he is afraid to have faith. It is not that this person has no desire to surrender his life to God, it is that he fears to do so.

Let us also consider the other possibility. If the adolescent says, and really means, that he does not believe there is a god there are reasons for this as well. All persons, adolescents and adults, base their knowledge and beliefs on their individual past experiences. A

mature, intelligent adult may disbelieve in the existence of a god on the basis of prolonged, intense and honest study of philosophy and theology. He may be a "normal" person with profound understanding of himself.

In the study of the adolescent we find that this is not so. His mind is not yet fully developed and his experiences have been comparatively limited. He has had neither the time nor the ability to reason sufficiently his disbelief.

In our culture it is the accepted pattern of behavior to believe in God. Our currency states our national trust in God, and we pledge our allegiance to our flag as symbolizing a nation under God. It is socially unacceptable to ~~profane~~ the name of God. In almost all of our communities there is a least one church. In most of our schools the Bible is read daily. Most people do not work on Sunday because it is a day set aside for the worship of God. The influence of belief in God is manifold. We find it wherever we turn.

Therefore, if an adolescent does not believe in the existence of a god he is abnormal. There are reasons why he does not believe, for it is natural and normal for a growing child to believe.

The main reason for an adolescent to disbelieve in the existence of a god is hostility or rebellion.

We picture God as a Father of ourselves and ~~of~~ all other people. If our experiences with our fathers have been a relationship of love, then our experience with God will be one of love. If we have had the kind of father against whom we rebelled, then we will also rebel against God. We will rebel even to the point where we disbelieve that He even exists.

Knowing the reasons for an adolescent's profession of disbelief helps in understanding that person and in assisting him in coming to a better understanding of himself. It is only when the adolescent comes to an awareness of himself, and resolves the conflicts which he has, that he will be able to experience any kind of meaningful relationship with God.

It was stated above that in our culture it is normal and natural for an adolescent to believe in God, and that if he does not he is abnormal. This is generally true, but not always.

Within our main culture there are many sub-cultures. A person who lives in a sub-culture and behaves in accordance with its standards is normal, in that sense of the word, even if the sub-culture itself is out of tune with the main culture. If a child comes from a sub-culture where God is not recognized, he is normal if he disbelieves in God. For him there is nothing unnatural or immoral in this practice, for it is the accepted pattern of behavior in the environment from which he comes. To him the activities of the main, or dominant, culture are unnatural, and we can no more expect that person to accept our standards than we could expect ourselves to accept his.

Working with this person is much more difficult than working with the rebelling adolescent. Here the job before us is to introduce and re-educate the adolescent to a whole new way of life. The depth of the biblical admonition to "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov.22:6, R.S.V.) clearly applies here. We expect this person to depart from the way of life in which he has been raised. The task is tremendous.

The profession of faith or belief in God is as significant as the profession of disbelief or the lack of faith. Just as there are reasons why one person does not believe, there are reasons why another does.

We may be prone to assume that each person's belief is the natural thing for him, that it is good, and dismiss it at that. It is not so simple. Because of our own orientation we quickly recognize the person who disbelieves as deviant from the norm, as a person with a problem. But also because of our own orientation we are slow to recognize the person whose very belief may be a problem to him, as deviant from the norm, as a person who may need our help.

Just as fear is a ~~major~~ cause of disbelief, it is also a causal factor in belief with many. There are persons who believe in God solely because they are afraid not to believe. There are others for whom fear is the major influencing factor in their belief. They have not found the meaning of the love of God, nor the inner peace and contentment that comes from living one's own life in harmony with the will of God. Rather, because of personal insecurities, or previous conditioning, they are afraid not ^{to} believe in God.

Fear is a strong factor ~~in~~ the belief in God even of non-delinquents. In 1946 a survey of undergraduate students of Harvard College and Ratcliff College was conducted by Allport, Gillespie, and Young.³ This study showed that fear or insecurity was a factor contributing to their being religious of forty-three percent of the Harvard men and forty-six percent of the Ratcliff women.

It is not at all surprising, then, that fear ranks high as a contributing factor to belief in God among delinquent adolescents,

³ Gordon W. Allport, and others, "The Religion of the Post-War College Student", The Journal of Psychology, XXV (1948) 12.

for generally speaking, they have had a much more fearful background than most persons.

Coupled with fear as a major cause of belief among delinquent adolescents are two other factors. They are akin to fear, but not quite the same. These are escape mechanisms, and the play-it-safe attitude.

The first of these, escape mechanisms, is characterized by the person who turns to religion, or belief in God, as a panacea for all his troubles. He is too weak to face his problems and deal with them, so he turns to religion to get away from them. He is insecure in himself, and is afraid to face himself alone. He needs a crutch upon which to lean, and the crutch he chooses is a belief in God. As stated above, this is similar to belief because of fear. The difference is that this person is afraid of himself, not afraid of God.

The play-it-safe attitude is characterized by the person who finds religion of no real help to him, but he figures he had better believe in God than not. That way if there was such a thing he would be on the right side, if not, he had not lost anything by it. He is afraid to take the chance, however, so consequently he has a superficial belief in God.

Fear and insecurity do play a major role in the belief in God among delinquent adolescents. Quite naturally though, there are other reasons as well.

Some come to believe in God through love. This love could be termed the positive aspects of parental influence. Our love for our heavenly father is shaped by our love for our earthly father. Love, however, does not rank nearly as high as a motivational factor

in belief in God as does fear. This leads to an obvious conclusion. Delinquent adolescents fear their parents more than they love them.

The profession of belief in God by a delinquent adolescent is quite significant to the pastor who would seek to work with him. By the mere fact that he professes to believe in God we know that he has some awareness of the Christian concept of God, and that this concept is meaningful to him. What this meaning is depends upon his past, and we learn of this by the way he verbalizes his beliefs. An understanding of the beliefs and the past experiences of the adolescent enables the pastor to be an effective person in working with him.

A large majority of delinquent adolescents are church attenders, and many are church members. These young people have been under the influence of the Church, yet they have not felt that influence adequately. If they are confused about God and His meaning, much of the responsibility is that of the Church.

The Concept of Prayer

The delinquent adolescent who prays may or may not profess to believe in God. The delinquent adolescent who professes to believe in God may or may not pray. There is not necessarily any correlation between the fact the the youth prays and his statements regarding belief or disbelief. However, if the adolescent does pray he does have a basic belief in God, whether he recognizes it or not. There will be many reasons why the adolescent prays.

Prayer means many things. Generally it is a plea for help. Often this plea will be couched in words of praise or thanksgiving. Other times this plea will stand by itself. What is and is not meant

by help?

To one, this means assistance in obtaining something objective which is desired, such as a new bicycle for Christmas or being asked to go to the high school dance. Another person would interpret this as securing outside forces to aid him in carrying out his set goals. For a third person it could be a cry coming from deepest despair. Still a fourth person would see this as meaning help in correcting one's past errors -- a plea for forgiveness. Jesus' parable of the tax collector who prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lu.18:13, R.S.V.) best portrays this.

Most delinquent adolescents see prayer in this last respect in some modified form.

Feelings of guilt are most responsible for this attitude toward prayer. If a person feels no guilt he has no reason to seek forgiveness. If he feels confident and strong he has no need ~~to~~ to ask for help. However, if the weight of his past actions is heavy upon him and he is too weak to lift it by himself, then he feels the need to turn to something greater than himself which is outside himself. This is why he turns to God in Prayer. He sees God as the one who is able to remove the burden of guilt. He sees God as the one who is able to give him what he needs.

Guilt can take many forms and degrees of intensity. It can range from a realistic sense of feeling penitent for what one has done wrong to neurotic or psychotic guilt.

Neither realistic guilt nor neurotic guilt would be uncommon in delinquent adolescents. However, the majority would experience a guilt that is somewhere in between, but closer to the neurotic level.

It is difficult to say whether the guilt experienced by some is realistic or neurotic. If the youth experiences extreme guilt which affects his actions, this may be because he is extremely guilty or because his guilt has taken on a neurotic aspect. One may be confident that the majority of delinquent adolescents do experience feelings of guilt.

There are other reasons why these young people pray. Although fear and guilt account for much of the prayer, they are not the sole causes.

For the play-it-safer, prayer is just another form of insurance. For the insecure person prayer is another crutch upon which to lean or another door of escape. Others would have what we would call a more normal attitude about prayer. It is a natural and familiar experience. This person would recognize the help that God has given him and would use prayer as the vehicle for rendering his thanks.

Some delinquent adolescents do not pray, at least not in the sense that they talk to, or communicate with, God. They do not consciously or wilfully turn their attention toward God in an attitude of expressing need, requesting help, or offering penance or thanks. They would deny that they ever pray. For some of them this would be true, for others it would not.

Those who do not pray find themselves in this condition not because they do not want to pray, but because they are unable to do so. Hostility and fear are usually the immobilizing forces.

The Concept of Heaven and Hell

The attitude which the adolescent holds regarding heaven and hell reflects to a large degree his attitude about death. To the vast majority of adolescents the terms heaven and hell are associated with experiences one encounters after death. The very mention of these terms triggers an associative train of thought about death. Any study of the significance of the concepts of heaven and hell to the adolescent would therefore be incomplete without an examination of the meaning of death.

The present attitude about, and meaning of, death to the adolescent are dependent upon the significance of these to him as a child. Fear and anxiety about death is a common and frequent occurrence in children. The very young child views the world as an extension of himself. When he wishes for or needs something these wants are usually satisfied. He therefore sees himself as omnipotent. He merely has to wish for something and it will be. As he grows older this view of himself is modified, but part of it is carried on throughout life. In the loved child this makes for self-confidence and an estimate of himself as an adequate person. In the unloved or rejected child the opposite is true.⁴

One of the earliest methods of handling frustration in the child is for him to wish it not to be. As he grows older this same method ~~shook~~ takes the form of wishing people and objects to be dead. When he encounters rebuke or punishment from his parents he may verbally or silently wish they were dead. However, he does not see death as a permanent condition.

As the child matures and his experiences broaden he begins to see that death has a finality and is irreversibly. This is when the

⁴ John P. Torp, Christianity and Delinquent Adolescents (Lexington, B.D. Thesis, 1962) 31.

meaning of death begins to become a real problem to him.

The process of maturation is slow, frustrating, and painful. In this process all children have conflicts with the authority figures in their lives and encounter situations when they wish these persons were dead. These wishes begin to cause guilt feelings and fear of death as the child enters adolescence.

The delinquent adolescent not only has encountered the normal pains and frustrations of the maturation process, but also has experienced these in an exaggerated condition. For him, therefore, the feelings of guilt and the fear of death also are exaggerated. Sometimes these fears are reversed and the individual desires his own death.

The concepts of heaven and hell, particularly those of hell, reflect this ~~inner~~ guilt and fear of death. The adolescent who feels guilty for his responsibility in annihilation wishes, and who consequently fears death and punishment himself, will regard hell as the source and time of his punishment.

The concepts of heaven and hell which the adolescent holds also indicate the personal evaluation he has of himself or, more simply, his self-concept. The person who feels unworthy, inadequate, fearful and insecure will reflect this in his view of heaven and hell.

Others will see heaven as an escape from reality -- as an escape from themselves and their responsibilities -- and this is mirrored in their concepts of heaven. These concepts are merely a sublimated form of regression.

Some individuals maintain that heaven and hell are experiences of the after-life, and others affirm that heaven and hell are present experiences of the individual. Which view any particular delinquent

adolescent holds is of little significance per se. It only becomes significant when it indicates something about that individual's emotional make-up.

If the person comes from a background where a very literal belief in the after-life is taught and he believes that heaven and hell are temporal experiences, or vice versa, we can see that there is rebellion of some form in operation. This may be rebellion against his parents or against the concepts of religion which he has been taught. His rebellion may be either emotional or intellectual. Emotional conflicts are the source of personality disorders. Intellectual conflicts are the source of learning and understanding.

The Concept of the Bible

The concept that the Bible is the Word of God is a common one with delinquent adolescents. Such a concept basically tells us one of two things; either the person expressing such a concept has little or no awareness of what the Bible is and is merely voicing a phrase he has heard, or he sees the Bible as being magically mysterious and he all but worships it. The majority of delinquent adolescents do equate the Bible with the Word of God. In many cases this means they believe the Bible has special powers; in others it merely shows their ignorance of the Bible. Often these reasons are interrelated. The person who believes in the magical abilities of the Bible is not likely to be well versed in it, and the person who is ignorant of the Bible is more likely to view it as something magical than any other way.

One of the most interesting aspects of a study of the

significance of Christianity to delinquent adolescents is the area of Bible stories and characters. Beginning at the approximate age of eleven or twelve and continuing for several years, the individual experiences a phenomenon called hero worship. This means he identifies himself with a person or character of whom he thinks very highly. Identification in the form of hero worship is a common occurrence.

Identification also takes place in play activities and in art appreciation. As well as identifying with art we also project ourselves into it. We read into the characters and stories our own impulses, emotions, and desires. In projection the objects of art become ourselves; in identification we become the objects of art.

Since the Bible, among other things, is definitely an art form, the stories and characters contained within it become the objects of much identification and projection. An examination of the favorite Bible characters and stories of the delinquent adolescents can tell us much about them.

Psychologists have long used such projective devices as the Rorschach ink-blot series and the Thematic Aperception Test to aid them in discovering something about the personality of the individual.

It is the contention of the writer that the examination of favorite biblical stories and characters can be used in a similar manner, although they are by no means to be considered as a validated and reliable measurement scale. These selections can, however, shed much light on the nature and personality of the individual.

In the study of favorite biblical stories and characters there is a major difference from projective techniques such ~~as~~ as the Rorschach and the T.A.T. Here the individual selects the story or

character that is most meaningful to him and then is instructed to tell about it. He freely makes his own selections, and these selections provide him with the opportunity for identification as well as projection. Identification is transferring to one's self the desirable attributes and prestige values inherent in the person or object selected. Projection is attributing to and seeing in others one's own impulses and traits. By studying the selections we can observe the identification which is taking place; by studying the descriptions of the selections we can observe the projection.

Caution, however, should be used when employing this method to ensure that one does not read his own problems into those of his client, or arrive at erroneous conclusions. It is not meant to supply total or infallible information about the complexities of the personality of the individual, but rather to give some general indications regarding his problems and reasons ~~2~~ for behavior.

The use of the Bible in this manner as a projective method is not incompatible with more orthodox approaches to its use. Jesus taught in parables so that the people hearing them could identify their own lives with the stories. In this way the Christian message became more vital and meaningful. His purpose was to speak to the needs and problems of the people in a manner which they could easily comprehend. This is also the purpose of the Christian minister and religious worker. Using the Bible as a projective method is almost equivalent to parables in reverse. Rather than telling a story to emphasize a point, we listen to a story to understand a person. Such an approach enables the Christian worker to understand better the needs and problems of those with whom he works. It provides an

opportunity for the individual to identify himself with biblical characters and to project his feelings and impulses so that they can be seen and understood.

Observations and Evaluation

Contrary to popular thought, the delinquent adolescents are church identified about as frequently as non-delinquents. There is no significant correlation between delinquency and church membership, but it is clear from their delinquent behavior that they have not had adequate religious training.

The majority of them believe in God. Most of them have confused ideas about deity. They have an unresolved sense of guilt. They are seeking for a closer and more meaningful relationship with God. Delinquent adolescents usually conceive of the Bible as being a mystical or supernatural book. Seldom is it regarded as being a relevant guide for living or even as a history of their faith. They tend to identify with the biblical characters who represent strength and courage. Usually this is to gratify their own unmet wish for superiority, but sometimes it is to compensate for frustrated desires to be dependent.

What does all this mean to the Church? What can the Church do to improve its ministry to these young people? The challenge to the Church is to address itself to life's problems, and particularly to the individual needs of its young people. Basically, this involves three areas -- preaching, Christian education, and pastoral care.

Effective preaching meets the psychological needs of people. The psychological needs of delinquent adolescents are the resolution

of fear and guilt, and to be understood and accepted. The challenge of preaching is to be creative, to tell of the love and compassion of God, and to interpret God's forgiveness of sin.

Christian education needs to produce changes in the lives of these young people by providing them with experiences which are meaningful to them and which are in harmony with the highest Christian values.

Pastoral care for delinquent adolescents means the pastor's genuine concern for them as individuals and children of God, and his ministry to their needs. The understanding pastor stands as a representative of God and as a father figure. If the adolescent can work through his feelings with the pastor, be accepted by him, and establish a meaningful relationship with him, he will be better able to face life wholesomely and live constructively.

Christianity is significant to delinquent adolescents. Though they may fear it, be hostile to it, be anxious about it, or rebel against it, Christianity holds a prominent place in their lives. The responsibility of the Church is to seek continually for a better understanding of these young people in order to help them establish more positive and constructive relationships with their faith and thus be able to live more wholesome and healthy lives.⁵

⁵ Ibid, p 61.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahamsen, David. The Psychology of Crime. New York, Columbia, 1960.
- Abrahamsen, David. Who Are The Delinquents? New York, Rinehart, 1952
- Allport, Gordon Willard, and Others. "The Religion of the Post-War College Student". Journal of Psychology, XXV (1948) 3-35.
- Gully, Iris. Children In The Church. Philadelphia, Westminster, 1960.
- Hoover, John Edgar. "The Youth Problem Today", Chicago Schools Journal, XXX (1948) 33-35.
- Kvaraceus, William Clement. "Delinquent Behavior and Church Attendance", Sociology and Social Research, XXVIII (1944) 284-89.
- McCann, Richard Vincent. Delinquency: Sickness or Sin. New York, Harper, 1957.
- National Conference on Prevention and Control of Juvenile Delinquency. Report on Church Responsibilities. Washington, 1957.
- Powell, Gordon. Release From Guilt And Fear. New York, Hawthorn, 1961.
- Salisbury, Harrison Evans. The Shook-up Generation. New York, Fawcett, 1958.
- Torp, John Philip. Christianity and Delinquent Adolescents. Bachelor of Divinity Thesis. Lexington, 1962.